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Sunday's Sermon

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Epiphany 5 Series C 2019

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Fifth Sunday after Epiphany – February 7

Where is Jesus today? We have been asking that question and finding different answers, some of them disturbing to us. Two weeks ago we saw him with the crushed and broken bodies in Haiti. Last week we found him perhaps administering an exorcism to us!

This week we also find Jesus in a strange place, in a tough place – we find him in us. Being good Lutherans we are quick to notice that we are not worthy of him. And of course we are right. Who is worthy of him? Our sins are great, our rebellion is thorough. But in our recognition of our own problem, we can even get to be a little prideful in that. I am so unworthy God could never take up residence in my life. I am the most unworthy person in the whole world, the chief of sinners.

But every communion, every baptism, every absolution, every worship service, every devotion, every word of forgiveness, every act of Christian kindness and love, belies another and strange truth. God is in us. Despite us, he has taken up residence in us. He has purged our sins with his painful death and glorious resurrection. He has found us sinful and broken and in mercy and compassion elected to remain with us and in us.

C.S. Lewis in the Screwtape letters explores this. He posits that Satan just doesn't get it. How can God love these human beings? They are nothing but a collection of contradictions, passions, and disgusting physical processes. How can he really love us? Satan, says Lewis, won't believe it, and is working tirelessly to uncover God's sinister motive, but so far has had no luck. Being Satan, he only understands power and manipulation and can only see the divine relationship with humanity as something in which God has an ulterior motive. The truth is much simpler than some vast divine conspiracy. He does simply love us, despite us.

So where will we see him today. The OT and Gospel readings remind us that God does not send angels into this world, no perfect heavenly beings, but oddly works through and with us. He sends the once sinful, now purified Isaiah out into the world as a prophet, transforming his fear into boldness. He goes with a Peter, who cowers at Jesus feet and simply wants him to leave him alone. But Jesus sees his friend and his beloved here, he will not leave him, not ever, even when Peter disowns him. Jesus never will.

Paul presents us with yet another reality of Jesus' presence in our lives. He lives our minds. Paul speaks of the blessings of the Spirit and how they build the church by engaging us as understanding, rational, learning creatures. God delights in this, he made us to learn. Have you ever thought that we might in this have a capacity which the angels do not? Medieval theologians thought that the angels were created with a perfect knowledge. Does that put us into a qualitatively different place than them? How is God found in your mind today?

Collect of the Day

O Lord, keep Your family the Church continually in the true faith that, relying on the hope of Your heavenly grace, we may ever be defended by Your mighty power; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

“Keep your family the Church in the truth faith...” This prayer immediately brings us to some interesting places. First of all, the true faith is a place to be. There is a true faith. In a world which increasingly doubts that reality, this may be something we need to preach about and deal with in a way much different from our parents’ generation. For the folks who labored through the Great Depression and WWII there were right and wrong answers to questions, there was a true faith and false faith. National Socialism gave a clear face to evil and drew sharp distinctions for all to see. It seems like evil is easy to see today but we have no consensus on just what is evil. This group sees abortion as a great evil and another group equally asserts that denying woman a choice is evil and must be resisted at all costs. (Consider the recent confirmation hearings for a Supreme Court justice.) I may clearly come down on one side of that question but what really strikes me is that the mutual condemnation of the other side precludes any sort of agreement about the nature/identity of good and evil.

Of course this is not only found in the political or public sphere. “How dare you say that something isn’t Christian!” exclaimed one of my students some years ago. “What gives you the right to say that something is not Christian!?” I was talking about the doctrine of the Trinity and had asserted that non-trinitarian faith communities might be admirable in many ways, but they could not really call themselves Christian. I wanted to talk about this very issue, but he thought the whole conversation was impossible. Who is to say what the true faith is, in fact, in his opinion, there really is not a true faith, only the good deeds which are measurable. In this student’s schema, a nice Mormon would be more Christian than a grumpy Lutheran despite the Trinitarian divide.

The preacher cannot assume that his congregants are all with this prayer on this issue. And if he can assume it, he needs to know that he is serving a narrow and diminishing segment of the society today, probably people of a certain age. We could of course be dismayed by this, and I believe that our culture will come to regret this generation’s long dalliance with relativism, but this is not entirely to be feared by Christianity. Indeed, it was in just such a time of people asking these sorts of questions about their long held beliefs that was the moment of Christianity’s great explosion of growth in the first centuries. It was people who heard Jesus call them to a sure and certain faith in the first and second century who would fill the Christian churches of that day. This sort of relativism is in fact Christianity’s native environment. What is not normal for Christianity is the fact that so many who fly under the Christian banner are espousing it.

We might need to ask these questions: Is the discussion of “the True Faith” really only a conversation that only work inside the faith community? How does this phrase sound to those outside that community? To many it will be risible. It is not a starting point for the discussion with the unbeliever. That conversation may need on our part to be rooted in a belief about that true faith, but it needs to be a goal of the discussion, it cannot be the launching point.

Finally we get to ask what is this true faith? I saw a T-Shirt at an LCMS convention that was poking a little fun at our own expense and that of a certain LCMS political entity: “Jesus Second, Walther First” was the logo. What exactly is this true faith? The temptation of orthodoxy is always to enlarge that definition to include more and more content. The temptation of the anti-intellectuals who are reacting to Orthodoxy’s abuses is to say that content doesn’t matter at all. The reality is somewhere between the two extremes. The prayer sums up the true faith rather nicely, “relying on the hope of heavenly grace” Luther’s catechism is the true faith, not because it is the true faith of itself, but because it points toward this reliance on the hope of heavenly grace. If we find therein another faith, another truth, we cannot say we have the truth faith, even in the Catechism. It is important to remember, it seems, that doctrine serves the true faith. It does not comprise the true faith. The true faith believes in Jesus. Doctrine helps me do that. The things doctrine says are not really the true faith, not it in its most basic sense. When we confuse that we foment the anti-doctrinal urges on one side and feed the idolatrous idea that having right doctrine makes us right with God. Only Jesus does that.

Ultimately the true faith is a relationship with God, a relationship which he established in creation, which he reestablished in the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus. Notice that the prayer starts us off with the word “family.” We are in a family, a relationship defined by our connection to the Father, a connection established when Christ entered the flesh of humanity, ran the human race, died the human death and met us all in our graves. The communities in which we live will only have ears to hear us when they have experienced the love of that family. The Gen X and Y folks don’t start there, you have to earn the right to have that conversation with them.

Readings

Isaiah 6:1-8 (9-13)

¹In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ²Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³And one called to another and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"

⁴And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. ⁵And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

⁶Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

⁸And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here am I! Send me." ⁹And he said, "Go, and say to this people:

"Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' ¹⁰ Make the heart of this people dull,
and their ears heavy,
and blind their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed."

¹¹Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And he said: "Until cities lie waste
without inhabitant,
and houses without people,
and the land is a desolate waste,

¹²and the LORD removes people far away,
and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.

¹³ And though a tenth remain in it,
it will be burned again,
like a terebinth or an oak,
whose stump remains
when it is felled."

The holy seed is its stump.

"Holy, holy, holy" this is the opening of the Sanctus, we sing these words just before we come to the table of the Lord. At least we do if we are observing a liturgical rite. The Sanctus concludes with the words of the pilgrims who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The preacher might want to draw attention to this. When we come to the Sacrament we are coming into the presence of the holy, we are coming into the presence of God, and this God once rode into Jerusalem where in the flesh he died for the sins of the world. The Sanctus has great material to preach.

This is the second week in a row we are getting a prophetic call vision: Jeremiah last week, Isaiah this week. Isaiah is in a totally different situation than Jeremiah and from a radically different background. Isaiah seems to have come from the inner circles of Judean royal power. In fact many have speculated that his access to the king suggests that he was part of the royal family.

Isaiah will also write a very long book. Its 66 chapters are the high water mark for Hebrew poetry. His mastery of language and use of literary device suggests a man of genius and education.

Unlike Jeremiah, Isaiah locates his call some distance into the book. The first five chapters are rather grim news and dour predictions. Isaiah has a tough message for the nation and its neighbors. Then he comes to his call, presumably his license to preach. But he has already been doing it, or at least recording God's prophetic word.

This is a famous passage, one which evokes a lot of imaginary. Isaiah is in worship and sees a vision of God. I don't know how many medieval mystics had visions while singing the daily office or at the Mass but there were a lot. Of course, most of them were monastics who spent a great deal of their waking hours singing the mass and daily office, but it is striking how many of these medieval visionaries saw that church was the moment for them to be in this sort of visionary contact with God. This passage undoubtedly influenced that.

He sees God, and he is immense. The hem of his garment fills the massive temple; that is just the hem of his garment, the rest of God would surely exceed any building built. Isaiah is terrified, he knows he is a sinner, a man of unclean lips as he says. This is a vision of terrifying dimensions and content.

One of the Seraph's, the ministering flames who are gathered around God takes a coal from the sacrificial altar before God, grasping it with tongs, and touches Isaiah's lips, purifying him and his mouth. Remember last week God also touched Jeremiah's mouth. There is a simple truth here, forgiveness hurts; it comes at a cost. When a Seraph, a being whose name means "flame" needs tongs to pick up a coal, you know this thing is hot. He sears Isaiah's lips with this thing. What is really interesting to me is that this attention to the heat of the coal is modern. Many make the observation today but earlier interpreters do not pay attention here. Perhaps we want to be a little careful here.

If you want to access scholarship and the early church on this, I commend to you a couple of texts. In 2000 the great OT scholar from Yale wrote a commentary on Isaiah in the OT Library series. In 2015, after his retirement, he published a more important book entitled "The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture" (Eerdmanns, 2015). If you are not familiar with Childs he was a founding member, along with Hans Frei, of a movement of scholarship which called into question the assumptions of the Higher Critical methods which were regnant in the mid-20th century. The other text I would recommend to you would be Robert Louis Wilken's "The

Church's Bible: Isaiah" (Eerdmans, 2007.) This is a commentary which gleans long passages from Church fathers such as Augustine, Chrysostom, and others to string together a commentary from the early church.

I am always attracted to the profound transformation of Isaiah in this passage. He had been wailing about his sin and what he thought was to be his immediate dissolution, but suddenly at God's request for a volunteer is running down the middle of God's throne room with his hand in the air yelling, "Pick me! Pick me!" The fearful Isaiah who was trying to blend in with the wallpaper or hide under an oversized chair has become the puppy seeking attention. The angelic touch with a coal, forgiveness, has remade him, including his will.

God's mission for him is not easy. The people are rebellious and hard to work with. Isaiah's message is a last ditch effort of sorts, one which God intimates he does not expect to succeed. The people are dull, hard of heart, deaf, and blind. Isaiah wonders, "How long must I do this?"

God defines then Isaiah's ministry and gives him one little bit of hope. The destruction will have to be utter. If even 10% remains, he will burn and destroy again. The house of Israel will be uprooted, destroyed, undone. The hope will be in the stump, the smoldering remnant that looks like it is dead. Out of that will come a holy seed – the very essence of the promise God first made to Adam and Eve at the time of the first transgression.

For the people of Israel who still held fond memories of Davidic glory and Solomon's vast trading empire, this must have been a bitter pill. The city of David seemed to be impregnable, their dynasty was perhaps the oldest in the ancient world. They counted on a rich history, powerful walls, traditions and more. God would pull that comfortable rug right out from under them. He would tear down the walls, ruin the temple, unseat David's descendents and crush the nation. If, when the dust settled, there was a little left, he would do it again until the whole thing was ground exceedingly fine.

The sprout would come from a deeply buried root, a distant descendant, a daughter of David who was a Galilean peasant, so impoverished that she and her husband had to make use of the provision for the poor in the Torah to bring two turtle doves instead of the lamb required for her sacrifice after childbirth. It was from this house of David humbled by centuries of Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and lately Roman domination that God would bring forth the righteous branch, the seed for which the whole world waited.

This text presents the preacher with several good sermon options. The Law/Gospel sinner/saint motif is clear and strong in this passage. Isaiah makes confession, God forgives, and Isaiah is rendered a holy servant of God. That motion is so familiar to the preacher that the sermon could almost preach itself.

One can alternatively preach the Isaiah who is transformed into a prophet. His words seem to be a pre-echo of Peter's in the Gospel lesson today and that is probably why we are reading them.

But by continuing the story into the message Isaiah preaches, one also has the ability to address the idols and confidences of our people. In what do we trust which is not God and which God must first strip from our lives in order for us to bear his fruit? Do we trust our security, our money, or our church culture? Do we think that the kingdom of God and the institution of the Church are the same thing? What if our church did die? Would God stop working in this community? Does God have to rip our security blanket out from under us so we can rely on him? I remember a time when I was chairman of the board of directors for a Lutheran High School and we found out that the principal had been accused of misconduct with a student. I never felt so helpless in all my life. This is a ticking bomb whose fuse I could not put out. What peace it was when wise advisors reminded me that this school was a good thing, God loved it, and he would make it happen. If he had another way to do this, he would close it down and do good work for the families and young people of this community without it. It freed me to act with integrity toward the school and all involved. As it was, we navigated our way out of this situation and the school lived on. But it was a very close thing and some years later it did indeed close. This passage, in the message which Isaiah is given to preach is a very challenging opportunity for the preacher today as our congregations are often shrinking and we may find ourselves in the midst of a group of people who are defensive and struggling to keep an institution alive when in fact God may be ready to move on to another form of ministry in this place.

Augustine talked about the difference between “use” and “enjoy.” For him we ought only enjoy God and use everything else, even people, to enjoy God. The folks at Isaiah’s time seemed to be “enjoying” their city, their long Davidic dynasty, and their political state. They had stopped “enjoying” God.

Can we do that with our congregation as well? Can we so identify our own congregation with the kingdom of God that we imagine that if it goes away, the kingdom God must surely go with it? But God has much more in mind than just this place and his king comes whether we pray for it or not, and this parish is not the totality of the kingdom. It might even be in the way. Do we really serve God by keeping the doors open when a parish really needs to die? Is it right to divert resources and funds to keep a congregation open when it really doesn’t serve anyone but the dwindling number of folks who come on Sunday.

Psalm 138

¹ I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart;
before the gods I sing your praise;

² I bow down toward your holy temple
and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness,
for you have exalted above all things
your name and your word.

³ On the day I called, you answered me;
my strength of soul you increased.

⁴ All the kings of the earth shall give you thanks, O LORD,
for they have heard the words of your mouth,

⁵and they shall sing of the ways of the LORD,
for great is the glory of the LORD.

⁶ For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly,
but the haughty he knows from afar.

⁷ Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you preserve my life;
you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies,
and your right hand delivers me.

⁸The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me;
your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever.
Do not forsake the work of your hands.

As is often the case, the psalm is a most interesting read if you take it from the perspective of the main character in the OT reading. Put this into the words of Isaiah and it makes very profitable reading.

Could it be the conclusion to a sermon on the OT? Have the congregation read it together. It helps to wake them up after a sermon too. ☺

I Corinthians 14:12b-20

¹²So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.

¹³Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret. ¹⁴For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. ¹⁵What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also. ¹⁶Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say "Amen" to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? ¹⁷For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up. ¹⁸I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. ¹⁹Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

²⁰Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature

This text is the professor's dream text. Knowledge, understanding, the sorts of things which are the stock and trade of the academic are the prize here. Simply to manifest the spirit in some

preternatural event is not necessarily good or to be sought for. It can be good, but it is not really what this is about. The real prize, the church building, takes place when folks know, understand, communicate, and meaningful grasp what is taking place.

Of course this can be taken to an extreme. Sometimes I think we should just worship and not spend so much time explaining to the imagined visitor or even our own members what we are doing. It is alright once in a while to engage in a holy act which we do not fully understand. Why do we stand now, or sing this song week after week? Perhaps you are more ready to answer that question and hear its answer after you have done so a few times. Then you are ready for that.

But that said, Christianity puts a high premium on the value of understanding and the mind. It is a very humanist sort of religion in that respect. It values and appreciates the whole human being, including the mind. At the risk of sounding like a cultural imperialist, I think this is part of the reason that the university movement which has so transformed knowledge and knowing in the world today started in the Christian west and not in the other parts of the world. It is not that the folks in other places are less intelligent or less able, but there was something about western Christian culture which a millennia ago started to think differently about education and human learning/knowing than other parts of the world.

Of course as an educator I am concerned about this, especially when I have students entering my classes who can barely read and write. Has our culture entered a new phase in which learning and understanding are not valued? What does that mean? It has profound implications beyond simply who will develop the cell phones of the future. Who will help us understand ourselves, who will write the great poems, hymns, and literature which will inspire, comfort, and define us? I think of Wittenberg where Luther taught. It was a university in a town of two thousand people. The local government decided they needed a university so the Elector of Saxony started one. Can you imagine a local government of a community that size, roughly the size of a small rural county, starting a university today?

Of course U of Wittenberg probably did not have to field a football team (Fighting Saxons!) and did not need an entire regime of student services to hold the hands of students all the way to graduation. You paid the prof. directly and he rented a room and after a while the faculty said you were ready to take the necessary steps to attaining the next “grade” or level: Bachelor, Bachelor of Sacred Text, Bachelor of the Sentences, Master of Arts, etc. Sometimes I wish it still worked that way. Anyone want to start “Medieval U” with me?

Paul says that the gifts to be sought after are the gifts which build up the Church, the body of Christ. He suggests to us that these are gifts of understanding. Five intelligible words spoken are better than a thousand obscure babblings. Of course this can be used in a polemic against the abuses of the charismatic and Pentecostal movements, but if that is where it ends, we are missing something. God loves it when we and our children understand their own faith. For me, this is a plea for our youth programs, our Sunday Schools, our Adult Bible Studies, and all the

educational offerings of the Church to start taking seriously the notion that Jesus was a teacher and Paul exhorts us to understanding. I like to play with young people too, but we need to be leading them to wrestle with hard questions, coaching them to serious intellectual inquiry, and teaching them substantive theology.

I teach introduction to theology classes for Concordia University. 70% of my students come from church backgrounds in which they attend Sunday Schools and Youth Groups and the like. Some of them are confirmed in Lutheran Churches and almost all of them have some exposure to the Christian faith. They universally have no idea what basic concepts like incarnation, trinity, baptism, or eschatology really mean. They have little or no idea what is the Bible story, the basic shape of the Scriptures. I cannot assume that they know terms like New and Old Testament, Torah, Pentateuch, Covenant, Pharisee, or Messiah. Somewhere along the line, we are failing these young people in our ministry to them.

I do not believe that they are not interested in the Incarnation, Atonement, or Eschatology. They are intensely interested in how the resurrection plays out in their lives and just who and what God is. This is much, much more than morality and situational games we like to play with kids. People are interested in God, but we too often shunt them off to a car wash, a pizza party, and to a youth Bible Study in which the words of Christ are presented to them as a rulebook/owners manual of life.

This sermon I envision being a challenge and a promise from God. He challenges us to think about how we are preaching/teaching/conducting ministry among ourselves. The promise is that God made our minds, loves our intellect, cherishes our understanding and works toward it. Jesus it says learned and grew in wisdom. God likes that.

Luke 5:1-11

¹On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, ²and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. ⁴And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." ⁵And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." ⁶And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. ⁷They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." ⁹For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, ¹⁰and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." ¹¹And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

So are you fishing or catching? Are you fishing in the day or at night? Peter's nets are not reasonable things to fish with during the day, but Jesus sends him and his comrades out. He sends them out at the wrong time, when it should not work, and it does. Suddenly the men who had a problem in that they caught nothing, find they have another problem – too many fish. We often like to sit in the pews and think that if we try this we will scare people away. My net is just too crude, I am no good at this, I cannot be a catcher of people, and I will frighten them. But Jesus sends us out, this is not an optional activity. Jesus does not say, "How's this sound, what if I make you a fisher of people." He just tells Peter and the gang what he is going to do. And they leave all and follow him.

What is a full net? Is it a good thing? Was it good news for the fish? The boats are sinking, it doesn't even sound so good for the fisherman? What is happening here? Jesus has so many people that they are literally driving him into the boat? Is he concerned for the financial well being of the brothers? Does he give them enough fish to sell and fund their excursion with Jesus?

One of the things that makes Jesus divine in the estimation of the Gospels is that he is immensely attractive to people. They flock to him. Today we see the crowds pushing against him so hard he has to get into a boat. But then we get the picture of Jesus interacting with one of those men, a man named Simon who will come to be better known to us as Peter. In that singular instance we get an idea of what made Jesus such a powerfully attractive personality.

Jesus' ministry is a huge success, at least in terms of numbers. It is helpful to remember that these same Jewish crowds will abandon him and some may even shout "Crucify" in Pilate's square, but at least right now he is the darling of all the Church Growth types. He even gets creative and innovative in his technique, stepping into a boat so he can teach. I wonder how that worked. I have stood on the shore of various lakes, large and small, and the wave action always makes just enough noise that I find it hard to hear over any distance when someone speaks to me.

The bulk of the story revolves around his encounter with Peter. Jesus preaches and teaches and then as a sort of tip to the fisherman who has lent him a boat, he instructs them to go out deeper and cast their nets over the side. This was a strange thing to do. In the days of Jesus they did not have monofilament line or modern materials, the nets were thick and heavy affairs, cast by hand over the side of a boat. Limited in their size, during the day they were simply ineffective. The fish seeing this large heavy net above them, would simply swim out of the way. They only worked at night. Only an idiot carpenter would fish with a net during the day.

But Jesus is on a fishing expedition of his own, and his catch is not of the scaly kind. Peter protests but the preaching of this man in his boat must have been significant. He puts the net over the side and even though he had had no luck all night when the fishing was supposed to happen, here in the day time, he hauls up a huge catch of fish. The catch is so large he needs his partners to help haul it in. Jesus ends up with a haul of his own, three disciples join his

movement that day, names which will come down to us from ancient times and be revered throughout the world to this day: Peter, James, and John.

The observant student of the NT may want to notice something here. It is not explicitly stated in the text, but this is not the first time Jesus and Peter have met. The first chapter of John suggests that Peter's brother, Andrew, had been following the Baptist and spent a day with Peter and Jesus along with John before the arrest of John the Baptist. Because these events take place after John's arrest in the story line, Peter and Jesus have already made an acquaintance. It would appear that Jesus' selection of Peter's boat is not entirely accidental. It would also appear that Jesus is picking up John's old disciples. It should be noted, however, that Luke does not tell us this. He wants us to imagine Jesus' words to Peter outside that context. There is a reason the Church did not adopt the Diatessaron, an early church document which harmonized and combined the four Gospels. Luke's telling of this story stands on its own with its own message. It does not need this information. We may find it useful but it may also distract us from what Luke wants us to hear.

Of course the preacher, having read the OT lesson may well want to dwell on Peter's response to Jesus and can do so quite fruitfully. Peter speaks the truth and begs Jesus to leave him in his sin. He is afraid of the holiness of God, which is the beginning of wisdom. But fear of God is not the end of wisdom. Jesus has not come to condemn the world but to save it. He will transform this sinful fisherman, a man interested in the kingdom of God, into a man who will boldly preach and teach and lead many to Christ. Peter will be the rock, one of the foundation stones on which God builds his church (Ephesians 2:19ff)

That same Jesus is calling his people today. Yes, with Isaiah and Peter we have a confession to make, but God hears that, touches our lips, fills our net with fish, and sends us out of these doors with a message to tell and a world's salvation to engage. He will do the saving, he will do the heavy lifting here, but he forgives us, equips us for ministry, and sends us out into this world to the places in which we work, live, play, eat, learn, and gather.

Law

1. I am a sinner, a man of unclean lips living in a people of unclean lips. God should have nothing to do with me except judgment and the meting out of painful justice.
2. Given a great gift, I have a penchant for messing this up. Isaiah's terrible calling is too much for me, I am too Peter like, when things get tough, I will surely fail in the hour of deepest need as Peter disowned our Lord.

3. But I am a fool really. I don't know half of what I should. I am intimidated when others know more than me and my fear of you knowing what I really am either makes me quiet or drives me to fill the air with meaningless babble and sentimental tripe.
4. I am more than a little afraid of the mind, if the truth be told. I have seen so many smart people think too hard and lose their faith. I doubt my ability in the first place and I don't want that to happen to me, my children, or anyone for that matter. Perhaps Christianity is best kept a little simple.
5. Who am I, after all, to be a servant in God's kingdom? Perhaps if he had a job polishing floors or taking out the trash I might fit in, but this saving the world thing is for other people, big people. I am a nobody, really, not very bright, not very capable, and not much good for kingdom when you get right down to it.

Gospel

1. God sent not an angel with a burning coal to cleanse me, but the sweetness of his son and the fire of the Holy Spirit – Christ bore the pain, the spirit has touched my whole body, I am cleansed, I am whole, I am more than a sinner, I am the very child of God.
2. God's Love expressed in Son and Spirit is not like my love. It is everlasting, pure, and simple. It does not get discouraged when the beloved does not live up to what God wants or expects, but gently and lovingly picks the fallen back up, every day, for a lifetime until he picks him or her up in resurrected glory to sin no more.
3. God made us wholly and has given us the marvel of our minds. He loves it when we learn and when our ministry engages people intellectually. Jesus became a real human being to redeem the whole of our humanity. Paul tells us that his love extends to our intellect.
4. The Spirit's promise we confess in the meaning to the third article tells us that the Holy Spirit keeps the church in the true faith. God's great gift of the mind is a gift given to us for our good. He will work toward that end, and while he never takes away the ability of the human being to say "no" to God, he also strives mightily to keep us close to Christ.
5. God loves small things and often does his best work through them. The kingdom will come through Jesus, humbly born to impoverished parents, little more than a peasant girl really. Peter was just a fisherman, unschooled and a little rough around the edges, sometimes a braggart, and always a coward. But God worked mighty things through them. He is not concerned about your lack of skill and ability, but His presence.

Sermon Ideas

1. No, I won't go away, I like it here! (That the hearer would believe God's statement that he loves him/her despite the sin and failures, and that God's loving presence empowers us to lives of confident and meaningful service.)

This sermon is probably best as a character study in Peter, with Isaiah playing the supporting role. This sermon puts the title into the mouth of God and really seeks to address once more that persistent Lutheran and very human idea that we are so unworthy. Yes, it is true that we are unworthy, but God has done something marvelous about it. No flaming angel has come with a burning coal to touch our lips. God has instead sent his Only Begotten to bear that pain on his Cross. And he has poured out the fire of His Holy Spirit upon us. He has washed us in the waters of this font. He has touched our lips with something better and probably less painful than a burning coal: the very body and blood of Christ. We really are the children of God, he has taken up a real and permanent residence in our lives.

Do we fail him miserably? Of course we do, but that is not able to drive away his love. This is where it simply does not work to compare God even to the best human father. His love for us is simply greater. Peter betrayed Jesus in his hour of greatest need. He wept bitter tears outside the palace of the high priest and Jesus died alone. It did not have to be that way, but it was. And another day when Peter drew up a massive catch of fish, and John told him that it was Jesus on the shore, Peter launched himself into the water, forgetting the fish, only remembering Jesus. I have to assume he went to shore to say, "I'm so sorry." But Jesus had not come to upbraid him but to give him a sacred and holy task, yes his own friend who had denied him three times. Three times Jesus asked, "do you love me?" Three times Peter said "Yes!" and Jesus sent him out.

God really loves us with a love which transcends human understanding, a love which does not die, a love which abides in us despite us.

And that love also empowers us to lives of service as it did Peter. The fearful man who huddled in an upper room with his friends would become the bold preacher of Jesus. Here you might want to bring in the Isaiah story as he is so dramatically transformed by the angel's burning coal. Likewise, the abiding love in our lives emboldens us and gives us confidence. There is nothing that we can do which will ever turn off the love of God. We may fail, we will indeed fail, but he will still love us and he even finds ways to work with our failures. He simply and persistently loves us and truly enjoys spending time with us.

And because he loves and spends his days with us, our words are never spoken alone, our deeds are always attended by his presence and they become much more than we might know. Peter did not have eloquence or years of schooling in which he was given the tools you would expect for a world changing individual. He had time spent with Jesus and the gift of the same Holy Spirit who was poured out on you in your baptism.

2. Don't Check Your Brain at the Door! (That the hearer would rejoice in the gift of the mind, as Paul exhorts us to ministry which engages human understanding, communication, and learning.)

Our generation of Christians stands in a rather unique place in history. Since the enlightenment we have seen the discipline of theology essentially come unhinged, uprooted from its pastoral practice. Those who write the books and present the university lectures which tell us about God are rarely the ones who stand in pulpits week after week, and it shows.

Ever since the rationalizing tendencies of Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican Orthodoxy began to show up in the years after the Reformation, Christians have had a temptation to reject the intellect. In our country there was a primitivism movement in the early days of the 1800's which launched the Christian Church which refuses to confess any creed but Christ, and which seeks simply to pattern its life after the New Testament. You might want to bring up the Weinbrennian Restoration movement which insisted that Communion could only be taken after dark and sitting down because that is what it said in the NT.

Lutheranism had its Pietistic movement, the Anglicans were split in half and the Methodist movement was born of this anti-intellectualism. Later the Third Great Awakening in the U.S. in the years after the Civil War would spawn a number of even more radically fundamentalist bodies such as the Assembly of God, the Church of God, the Nazarenes, etc. Today these form the backbone of the American Evangelicals. What marks many of these bodies is a persistent belief that faith and reason are at odds with each other, and faith wins out. While undoubtedly filled with many Christians who love the same Lord Jesus, fundamentalism rejects a precious gift from God, a gift which this world needs right now. It rejects the human intellect, asserting that faith is purely a thing of the heart. That is simply not the whole truth.

God loves our minds, he loves it when we learn, he came into humanity and Luke tells us he grew in wisdom and stature. He learned. God has always loves us body, soul, and mind, and he delights in the learning of our minds. Paul today speaks of the prize of communicating meaningfully, five words spoken intelligibly are better than thousands which are not understood. Jesus has died to redeem our minds. He loves them.

We are engaged as a church in a ministry to minds. We have Bible studies and sermons, we provide materials and resources, and we may even operate a school or two. In fact, the LCMS parochial school system is second only the Roman Catholic system in the US. We like our schools. Perhaps this is an encouragement for you to get engaged in this ministry in a meaningful way. It is a call for this preacher to ask hard questions in Bible studies

and to grow myself. It is a challenge to all of us to remember that God has given us a gift and we ought to use it. But it is also a promise. God loves your mind and in the measure you have received, he loves to see you learn and grow. He has entered into this humanity that he might redeem the whole of it, including your mind.

I don't always know exactly how a thoughtful and intellectually honest discussion of Evolution will end up, but I know that if I close my mind and scream "Genesis 1" as if it is an answer to this, I am dooming myself to fight this fight for decades more. I don't know exactly what this means, but I am confident that God does and that he wants my brain in that discussion and that his Spirit will be working to keep me and all his people in the true faith.

3. Jesus is calling you; Do not be afraid (That the hearer would understand that God's call to service is not predicate on his or her suitability, perfection or desire for the task, but instead, it is God's gracious invitation to join Him in His work. All necessary tools, talents and even the "catch" are provided.)

We have often focused on the fishing, the net, the equipment, the catch, but have we talked about the players in neighborhood of all this fishing?

Shall we talk about the net as the Gospel? This Gospel that has taken root in our hearts is the daytime net. The clunky night time net is me. God casts them both into this community. The Gospel which he casts into this community, is in some part, cast through me. I look at my own ability to be the catcher of men for the kingdom of God and I am dismayed, as Peter would have said it was a foolish thing to cast his heavy net into the bright sunlit waters of the lake of Genneseret. If you throw me into the water, I am a lousy net, I am not an attractive thing except to the occasional carnivore looking for an easy meal. But oddly, Jesus does cast us into the water, but in our very weakness resides his very love and Gospel itself.

My fear of failure cripples me in this regard, I feel that if I do not succeed, somehow I will be laughed at, or even condemned. But Jesus did not choose the eloquent, the powerful, or even the particularly wise. He chose fishermen, blue collar guys, men who were not even particularly successful fishermen apparently.

He has chosen us, all of us, the folks in the congregation to which I preach. He can use all sorts of folks to be the net. It is true that Peter would walk with Jesus for some time before he was sent out, as indeed we are encouraged and invited to walk with him, to listen at his feet, to immerse ourselves in Jesus. But one cannot forget that the purpose of this immersion, of this discipleship was the catching of men.

The good news in all this is that we have a place in God's plan for the salvation of the world. He has given us a promise that though we are not what you would expect to be a

successful catcher of men, he has promised: I will be a catcher of men. But will I always be a successful catcher of men?

Peter had had a fruitless night of fishing. He took a lousy fisherman and sent him out to an illustrious success. Peter now is being sent out into a world to do another sort of fishing. His success or failure will not be Peter's but God's. If he succeeds he must give glory to God, for God is the one who fills the nets. If he has what looks like a catastrophic failure on the scale of Isaiah, that too is part of God's larger plan. The burned out stump that is all that is left of Isaiah's message is the hopeful seed. Isaiah was sent to fail as a prophet, but God had a masterful plan of his kingdom somewhere in there.

As we are sent out of these doors I cannot promise you a net full of fish, but I can promise you that Jesus goes with you, that he will use your words, deeds, whole life, to be an instrument of his grace to the people around you. He will make this work for his kingdom, not my kingdom, and that takes a huge burden off my shoulders. I am not ultimately responsible for the success of this endeavor.